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Art-Mimesis and Political Reality in a Decade of Cuban Film

by

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Art-Mimesis and Political Reality in a Decade of Cuban Film

In the 1994 film *El elefante y la bicicleta* (directed by Juan Carlos Tabío) two women in the marketplace of an allegorical version of Cuba (an island called *La Fe*) are discussing the film they saw the night before, screened by a mobile cinema that had recently arrived to the island.¹ The debate turns to an abstract discussion of the function of film, and Serafina posits that, “Las películas tienen que ser bonitas, que terminen alegres, que la muchacha se case con el muchacho.” Broadly in the style of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, Serafina displays a non-social aestheticist view: that film is designed to provoke aesthetic pleasure and nothing else.² Suddenly, there is a Brechtian drum roll and the other woman, Eloísa, puts on some black-framed glasses and says: “¡Pero Serafina! El cine, como toda manifestación artística, debe constituir un elemento de penetración de la realidad.”³ Related to this question of the function of art, is that of its general relationship to the reality external to the work, with philosophical discussions often taking ‘mimesis’ as their starting point. Audiovisual media have always been seen to have a privileged relationship to reality, compared to other mimetic arts, due to the “impression of reality” caused by the “perspectival analogy of the photographic image, persistence of vision, and the phi-effect or ‘phenomenon of apparent movement.’”⁴ However, the so-called objectivity of the reality presented is called into question by a number of factors, including: changes in technology that allow for the manipulation of the image; the realization that film, like other representational arts, is not unmediated but has a certain perspective or ideological vision; and post-structuralist/postmodern skepticism about whether there is a stable or authentic reality to be represented in the first place (Jean Baudrillard suggests that simulation no longer refers to a referential field).⁵ The debates regarding what is at stake in terms of mimetic representation in general can be loosely related to the previous three notions: is it deceptive? (Plato), does it

reinforce ideological stagnation? (Barthes and others), or does it enable the recreation of reality in a way that contributes to our understanding of it? (Aristotle and Ricœur).⁶ A comprehensive definition of mimesis is elusive since even at a very basic level the terms “imitation,” “reflection,” and “representation” are all widely used but imply quite different notions of the relationship between art and reality.

This article will address two instances of self-conscious filmic comment on the perceived effects of mimesis, in the particular context of Cuba in its extended moment of crisis (or successive crises) following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The effects of this dissolution included the loss of seventy per cent of Cuba’s import capacity over three years, as well as the knock-on impact on agriculture and industry of the halting of fuel imports.⁷ The government response was to declare a “Special Period,” which saw the imposition of strict controls of household energy expenditures, a reduction of food rations, the promotion of cycling as a means of transport, and the reduction of organized entertainment, amongst other domestic measures.⁸ The “lowest point of morale and disintegration” was the summer of 1994, the year that *El elefante y la bicicleta* was released.⁹ Riots in Havana, the “Balsero crisis” exodus, electricity blackouts, and extreme food shortages forced the government to accelerate processes of political and economic reform.¹⁰ However, the tentative success of such reforms as the relative opening of Cuba to external markets, “dollarization,” and increased freedom to farmers to sell their over-produced goods and for the establishment of family-run restaurants, meant that “by 1999, the worst had not only passed, but some of the old hope seemed to have returned.”¹¹ Antoni Kapcia, who emphasizes the role of “dreams” in underpinning the imaginary of a “cubanía revolucionaria,” argues that the adjustment of these dreams to a “lower” more “mundane” level, during this period of crisis, allowed for the

survival of the system after 1994 with the effect that “the average Cuban is still [...] remarkably committed to many of the basic ideals and precepts of *la Revolución*.”¹²

El elefante y la bicicleta was produced at the peak of the crisis during a moment of profound change and uncertainty. The film presents a form of anti-mimesis, whereby the life of a fantasy population starts to *imitate* the cinema stories that are shown on their fictional island of *La Fe*. This would appear, at first glance, to display optimism with regards to the ability of film to impact upon reality. Nevertheless, in this article I argue that there are a number of aspects that serve to undermine this possible conclusion including the use of humor, parody and exaggeration to undermine any sincere belief in the power of film to rejuvenate a sense of revolutionary spirit, and an ending that seems to close itself off in a self-referential loop, as opposed to opening out to provoke action on the part of the external audience.

Suite Habana, on the other hand, reflects—to some extent—the optimism produced by a decade of tentative economic recovery. It represents one of the examples of adaptation by the film industry to its particular economic turmoil in the form of a co-production with Spain, and the comparatively cheaper forms of production on location and with non-professional actors. In terms of its mimetic function, the use of the real location of Havana and non-professional actors allows for the self-conscious exploration of the possibilities and limitations of *reflecting* reality through film. As such, Edna Rodríguez Manguel classifies *Suite Habana* as part of a tendency in recent Cuban cinema that she calls “factual fictions,” whereby “facts [from external reality] are re-framed and represented in and on film, opening a space for fiction.”¹³ This in turn provokes “questions as to where the line might be drawn between fact and fiction, particularly when confronted with concrete political realities.”¹⁴ The film opens up a space for ordinary Cubans to “perform” their daily lives thus incorporating

them into an artistic public sphere as “participants” rather than mere “spectators or consumers.”¹⁵ By examining these two films together, then, we can assess the extent to which their directors have faith in the capacity of the film industry to keep articulating or critiquing the “dreams” of the Revolution at these two moments, a decade apart; and whether the different forms of mimesis used are configured as deceptive, seen to reinforce ideological stagnation, or might succeed in contributing to our understanding of reality (as outlined above).

Brecht and Bazin: Two Different Forms of Realism

Historically, debates regarding mimesis, realism, and revolution have been approached in essays by influential Cuban filmmakers and theorists. These films appear to engage with two of the canonical essays of Cuban film theory, “The Viewers Dialectic” (1988) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea in the case of *El elefante y la bicicleta*, and “For an Imperfect Cinema” (1968) by Julio García Espinosa, in the case of *Suite Habana*.¹⁶ Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky has discussed the way in which *Suite Habana* “concretizes the utopian promise of García Espinosa’s manifesto” by portraying a “balanced life,” whereby the division between labor and art is eradicated, based in turn on Marx’s early writings.¹⁷ It does so by following ten characters over the course of a day, all of whom have both “day jobs” and creative performative roles that they enact in their free time. By giving the non-professional actors space to “perform” their own reality, as well as removing speech to leave many of the gestures open to audience interpretation, *Suite Habana* conforms to some of the characteristics of García Espinosa’s notion of “popular art,” in which “the creators are at the same time the spectators and vice versa.”¹⁸ Likewise, through extreme close ups Pérez places

emphasis on the reality of the material flesh and haptic interaction rather than spoken language and thus works towards breaking down the “artificial distinction” identified by García Espinosa, in which the “spirit” is seen as more elevated than “material” life.¹⁹ Nevertheless, despite this utopian dimension, Pérez seems to display ambivalence towards the real achievements of the Cuban Revolution; through external objects and enclosed spaces he suggests a sense of confinement, which is mirrored in the spectator’s experience of the visual landscape. This symbolic confinement, this article argues, is a comment on his own sense of the space in which he can operate as an artist at that time, shortly after a crackdown on so-called dissidents in 2003 which came to be known as the ‘Black Spring’.

In “The Viewers Dialectic” Alea discusses the fact that in the early years of the revolution realism proved popular in filmmaking since everyday occurrences were so spectacular that, “For cinema it was almost sufficient just to record events, to capture directly some fragment of reality, and simply reflect the goings-on in the streets.”²⁰ But his essay, two decades on, marked a reflective moment during the institutionalized stage of the revolution, in which people were beginning to wonder whether “Real” socialism would ever be achieved. The *Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficas* (ICAIC) has always used self-censorship and internal moderation to maintain a degree of independence and freedom of expression, through a good relationship with the state.²¹ Alea’s essay argues that, in the context of institutionalization, realism in film was no longer sufficient unless it was able to produce a *meaningful* reality.²² He presents film as a tool to help the masses find “ways of understanding problems, of strengthening their ideological coherence and of reaffirming daily the principles that give life to the Revolution.”²³ However, reading between the lines, he is also postulating for a greater autonomy of cinema in its representation of reality and a

tolerance by the regime of a certain level of criticism for the benefit of the on-going survival, and potential extension of the revolution.

Since the start of the 1990s film production had been suffering from a severe lack of investment due to the economic crisis and was threatened by both economic cuts and a potential merger with the army and televisual media branches of the state. The ICAIC's autonomy was also under threat from a cultural crackdown that had seen the banning of the film *Alicia en el pueblo de las maravillas* (Daniel Díaz Torres, 1991).²⁴ It is in this context that *El elefante y la bicicleta* engages with the ideas put forward in "The Viewer's Dialectic," taking to an exaggerated logical extreme Alea's pretensions as to the ability of film to penetrate and modify reality, through rejuvenating and upholding the ideals of the Revolution. It uses a self-reflexive style—acknowledging the limitations of film—by resorting to a parodic representation of its role in society, displaying a postmodern sense of skepticism. This forms part of a tendency within postmodern expression in Cuba identified by Catherine Davies, in which the work "challenges Marxist modernity (the functioning as a neo-avant-garde) but *at the same time* mocks those very challenges, thus parodying the forms that critiques of Marxism have taken."²⁵

Suite Habana, on the other hand, can be understood within the context of a "realist revival" in world cinema as identified by Lucía Nagib and Cecília Mello.²⁶ This begins, they say, in the mid-1990s in a "*post*-postmodern era" and signals "the end of irony and intertextuality, and the re-establishment of the moving image's ties with objective reality."²⁷ This trend has led to a recuperation of the ontology of André Bazin who celebrated the indexical relationship of the cinematic signifier with the real object, and the usefulness of technique—such as deep focus—in bringing the spectator even closer than he would be in reality, leading to a strong possibility of identification.²⁸ Bazin's ideas have often been

considered to be in opposition to the theories of Bertolt Brecht who, rather than creating identification and proximity to the reality portrayed, sought to rupture precisely this identification and instead favored techniques of estrangement and alienation in order to expose the mystifications involved in representation.²⁹ Yet Nagib and Mello question the opposition that associates Bazin with realism and Brecht with anti-realism: “Brecht’s epic theatre was nothing but a realist method, one concerned with the reality of the medium rather than with the fable.”³⁰

Brechtian alienation devices became popular in Latin American cinema in the late 1960s when identification in classic realist cinema, particularly the Hollywood model based on verisimilitude, came under fire for masking social contradictions and provoking “passive acceptance of bourgeois ideology [...] by its monopoly of appearance.”³¹ In other words, Hollywood representations were seen to fulfil Barthes’ assessment of mimesis as a “conservative and conserving force”.³² In “The Viewer’s Dialectic” Alea argues for the use of Brechtian techniques to present society’s problems in such a way as to highlight their socially constructed nature and direct a response, “stimulating and channeling spectators to act in the direction of historical movement, along the path of society’s development.”³³ However he cautions against an outright rejection of a cognitivist perspective acknowledging that aesthetic pleasure and the emotional element of identification do not always lead to passive spectatorship, but can be linked to the processes of understanding. As such he favors a balance between identification and alienation, through which “the spectators’ interest is aroused so that they can come to feel, on the highest level, the emotion of rationally discovering some truth.”³⁴ As we will see these are ideas explored explicitly by *El elefante y la bicicleta*. Bazin, for his part, did not favor the imposition of precise meanings on the spectator and criticizes the use of montage for creating direct interpretative links and ruling

out the ambiguity of expression.³⁵ Ambiguity of expression, specifically of facial expression, is precisely one of the tools that Pérez uses to leave *Suite Habana* open to interpretation.

El elefante y la bicicleta: Parody

El elefante y la bicicleta is set in a fictional location—the island of La Fe (The Faith)—where the citizens are ruled by an oppressive tyrant Don Gavilán. There are no establishing shots to give any sense of where it is aside from on a cartoon map, which immediately disrupts the “reality effect” of the film. The constructed fictional nature of the film, and our position as spectators, is highlighted from the outset when a voice-over narrator says, “Esta película comienza quince minutos antes de que yo regresara a La Fe,” and reinforced throughout the rest of the film through the use of other modes of artistic reflexivity. Rather than seeking to reflect a direct reality through verisimilitude, the opening camera-work frames the story as an allegory of the history of the Cuban Revolution.³⁶ Brechtian techniques, such as *gestus*, immediately identify the oppressor, Don Gavilán, in his role as the “bad guy” to be overthrown. As the camera cuts between different locations on the island, the camera angles reflect the society’s power structures: low-angle shots of Don Gavilán in his huge castle emphasize his power, whilst shots mimicking his vision through binoculars indicate his surveillance and control over the population. Yet due to the already familiar nature of this story, the effect of this exaggeration is that of a parody of the narrative of the Cuban Revolution. It appears to make an ironic reference to the fact that over thirty years on from the Revolution unequal social relations are still evident and surveillance, but by a different set of actors, is still the norm.

El elefante y la bicicleta explores the potential impact that cinema could have in transforming and improving social relations, through the arrival of a cinematographer to La Fe. The first film shown to the population is a silent film portrayal of the legend of Robin Hood. In this *mise-en-abyme* film a bridge is seen to be destroyed, which then also miraculously occurs in La Fe, meaning that the internal narrative not only reflects—but seemingly influences the main narrative. This gesture disrupts our usual perception of “cause and effect,” which is a common feature of postmodern artistic production. The broken bridge traps the cinematographer who would have otherwise left due to his heartbreak at finding out that the love of his life –Marina Soledad –has had a child by another man during the time of his imprisonment. The enthusiastic population of La Fe convinces him to show the film again, but this time the film has changed and now has accompanying music. This scenario is repeated with successive cinema showings moving forward in time, through a series of genres –from a period drama featuring the independence struggle, a film of the Mexican Revolution, a Brazilian *cinema novo* film in the style of Glauber Rocha, to a Soviet musical.³⁷ By this time, inspired by the revolutionary films that they have seen, the townspeople have overthrown Don Gavilán and are engaged in a modernization program: building social housing, relocating the school to the fortress (education now occupying the position of power previously held by the tyrant) and providing a new house for the cinema. The progress of La Fe therefore mirrors the progress within the *mise-en-abyme* films in a process of *anti-mimesis*, that is to say that life imitates art rather than the other way round, as discussed in the famous essay “The decay of lying” (1891) by Oscar Wilde.³⁸ At times the fiction on the internal screen literally penetrates reality: for example, during the overthrow of Gavilán’s fortress, missiles fired on the population are deflected by the cinema screen and fired back as represented to us by the reversal of a cartoon missile. This exaggeration of the power of

fiction to impact on reality undermines the message that film *can* change society. It seems significant, moreover, that the showcased internal films are in the style of other revolutionary movements that all also failed to create truly successful socialist societies in the long term: the Mexican institutionalized party of the Revolution (the PRI) was then coming to the end of its hegemony (and had just entered the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement); the hope contained within the Cinema Novo movement had been quashed by twenty years of dictatorship in Brazil; and the Soviet Union's dissolution had, precisely, contributed to the dire situation in Cuba at the time of the making of *El elefante y la bicicleta*.

On a different level, the inclusion of the *mise-en-abyme* films allows Tabío to demonstrate Alea's ideas from "The Viewer's Dialectic" regarding the interaction between Brechtian alienation and emotional identification, and come to further conclusions about the extent to which he thinks it is possible for film to succeed in "channeling the spectators to act".³⁹ The different showings of films are often followed by instances of debate over the values portrayed or even the role of art itself. One of the funniest moments, and from the same sequence described at the start of the article, is the exchange between Serafina and Eloisa in the marketplace. Serafina argues that films should have a happy ending because life is bad enough, and we should not have to be reminded of that. Eloisa then puts on some intellectual glasses over the sound of a Brechtian drum roll and responds with a monologue that includes the following: "The aesthetic event in itself can, and should, signify an enriching experience of the same cognitive act that, day by day, man makes of his own reality, unveiling the keys for his subsequent transformation."⁴⁰ Through this process of (over-intellectualized, and therefore unlikely) reflection and debate the attitudes and behavior within the community are changed, which testifies to the success of the diegetic films' creation of an active spectator. This is illustrated in the town's rehabilitation of the female

lead Marina Soledad after they identify her with the on-screen character who had been raped by the represented version of the tyrant. The population is prompted by the film to debate the unfairness of her ostracization from society, and thus re-incorporate her into island life. Nevertheless, the humorous way in which the active spectatorship is portrayed, complemented by the parody of a Brechtian alienation device, has the effect of ultimately questioning the possibility of promoting change in this way.

The main way that the *mise-en-abyme* films create identification is through the mimetic form of semblance, whereby the characters recognize visual and social similarities between themselves and the characters on screen (in this case literally because they are played by the same actors). This form of mimesis triggers, for the diegetic audience, the cognitive and emotional responses that according to Merlin Donald in *Origins of the Modern Mind* are “far more efficient than language in diffusing certain kinds of knowledge.”⁴¹ In the subsequent interactions between the population and the films, sometimes the films provoke the characters to act directly, and sometimes they respond to prompts from the characters. For example, in one sequence during the *Cinema Novo* pastiche the priest is moved by what he sees to stand up and shout “This is the house of God!,” which is followed by the on-screen priest repeating the same phrase and gesture. On the one hand, this interaction echoes Alea’s statement that “film and reality are not, cannot be, divorced from each other. A film forms part of reality [...] film is a manifestation of social consciousness and also constitutes a reflection of reality.”⁴² However the literal yet unbelievable way that these kinds of statements are portrayed, once again, makes it difficult to take the message seriously. They imply, instead, a postmodern questioning of Alea's claim that any given “truth” or “reality” can be represented, at all.

Whilst emotional identification is explored through the reaction of the population of La Fe to the *mise-en-abyme* films, it is the Brechtian alienation devices that perhaps most capture our attention as the external viewer. The relationship between the cinema and its spectators and their relationship to us is made explicit by the *mise-en-scène* of the internal cinema screen, often shown in its entirety, and the fact that we are sometimes placed in a position facing the audience in order to be able to see their gestures of emotion. At other times we are one amongst the audience watching the fictional screen. This form of self-reflexivity, in Brechtian terms, would be used to break the “reality effect” of the production in order to create an active spectator giving direction as to how we should respond to the messages conveyed to us in filmic representation.⁴³ This is undertaken most provocatively at the end of the film when we are faced with the internal audience facing us, but actually facing a representation of themselves on the screen. Members of the audience start to say “let us wait and see what they do,” whilst others get bored and get up to leave. The answer as to the extent Tabío seems to believe that film can impact on reality is this subtle difference between the final scene addressing an external audience or addressing the internal audience themselves. It could be argued that the link between the external and the diegetic audience is clear either way and thus promotes a sense of self-awareness, if not the impulse for direct action. Nevertheless, it seems a significant directorial choice—given that it would have been easy for Tabío to leave the ending to open out to the external audience—to, in this case, make it clear that it is themselves that they are seeing. The effect is therefore a self-conscious cutting off of the film’s pretensions for revolutionary transformation, leaving us the impression of a self-contained unit rather than a truly open possibility for change within society.

Suite Habana: Performance

In his more classically “realist” approach, Fernando Pérez in *Suite Habana* appears to aim for verisimilitude rather than rupture. *Suite Habana* is set on location in Havana and follows the day in a life of ten ordinary Cuban citizens. It sets their stories in a parallel montage and uses the naturally changing light of the day, as well as climatic changes, to maintain a sense of the unity of time. The use of a real location, real people, and a coherent sense of time—combined with sharp focus and vivid colors—achieve a traditionally realist sense of transparency, the notion that we are being “shown” rather than “told”. This is reflected in camera work that lingers on the details of the run-down buildings and often places the viewer in the position of following the characters, using a moving camera to create a subjective perspective. Through the use of extreme close ups Pérez appears to seek to “recover the physicality of spectatorial experience,” giving a greater sense of embodied existence through the senses and the sense of proximity we get to the material body.⁴⁴ However Pérez does draw attention to his directorial role through a game of concealing and revealing, both at the level of plot, and with certain camera shots and *mise-en-scène* moments. Often the cut to a sequence featuring the following character will begin with a close-up of an inanimate object that disguises, or only hints at, who we might be about to see. Through the technique of concealment, and with a lack of explanatory narration or dialogue, he provokes a sense of curiosity in the viewer. For example, the start of the film features Iván cycling along with a pair of huge pair of platforms that remain a mystery to the viewer, until we later find out that he performs as a drag artist in the evenings.

In realist cinema such as this, in which non-professional actors or real people are the protagonists, filmmakers have had to wrestle with the ethical dilemma of the very real

consequences of their incursion into the reality of their subjects. In his article “The Difficulty with Documentary” Brazilian filmmaker João Moreira Salles says that documentary is not defined by the role it can play in modifying external reality, but rather by its inward obligations: “It is not what can be done with the world, but what cannot be done to the character.”⁴⁵ This sense of responsibility has led to a number of self-conscious explorations of this aspect of documentary or realist cinema such as the Mexican production centered around a Cuban girl *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* (Carlos Marcovich, 1997). This film visibly acknowledges and critiques its own intrusion into, and deliberate modification of, the course of the life of an ordinary girl, Yuliet Ortega. She is originally incorporated into a Mexican music video on a whim and subsequently becomes the subject of an exploratory documentary that leads to a contrived reconciliation with her father. However, this unease has been overcome to some extent by a notion associated with cultural studies, which Tomas Elsaesser suggests might be called “Contractualism” that acknowledges—and seeks to take advantage of—both the “hidden power structures” and “openly negotiated conventions” inherent in the filming of real subjects.⁴⁶ Through “performance” and “play” the subjects have space to appropriate their own representations, which may even empower them to negotiate “social constructions both in real life and in visual representations.”⁴⁷ This also alters the position of the spectator in that they can neither “colonize” the subject with their gaze nor be fooled by the director’s representation. As such the actors become “partners in negotiated conventions.”⁴⁸

This desire to reflect the reality of ordinary Cubans from a number of different spheres, whilst granting them space for control over their own representations, seems to be what Pérez hopes to achieve in *Suite Habana*. Despite the fact that the characters would have been directed to “act naturally” in front of the camera, the element of performance can be

glimpsed now and then for example in the self-conscious measured walks of Ernesto and Herisberto. Attention is also drawn to performance on a more obvious level in the content of the film since many of the characters have a double life divided between their “day job,” be it working on the railway (Herisberto), as a doctor (Juan Carlos), or as a laundry man (Iván), and an alternative artistic and performative role as saxophonist in a church, a clown at children’s parties, and a drag queen artist, respectively. The choice of characters with overt performative alter-egos seems to suggest that there may be a performative side to most people and that, in fact, contact with a camera may be “a better guarantee of my existence [...] than the unmediated face-to-face, likely to give rise to misunderstandings.”⁴⁹

The suppression of dialogue in *Suite Habana* is a significant directorial choice and, combined with the presence of music, it is one of the features that evokes the City Symphony genre prominent in the 1920s. It is through a comparison with one famous example of the genre: *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt/Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927), that we can begin to glimpse aspects of Pérez’s critique of the Revolution. The City Symphony genre corresponded temporally to the peak of the transformations of capitalist modernity, in the world’s metropolitan centers. As a form of ‘mimesis’ the films sought to reflect and showcase capitalism’s dynamism, technology, infrastructure, mass consumption, and the changes in perception that went along with these.⁵⁰ In a moment of relative opening of Cuba to external markets *Suite Habana*, appears to represent, on the other hand, a relative sense of decadence and ongoing stasis, but at the same time also celebrates community and the fulfillment to be gained from work and art. The film references *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, specifically, in a number of ways, beginning with the image of the lighthouse of the Castillo del Moro that could be figuratively seen to take on the task of “illumination” from the final shot of the rotating light from Radio Tower Berlin.⁵¹ Both films

feature the railway, but whilst in *Berlin* the camera takes advantage of the movement of trains for many of its shots, in *Suite Habana* the camera is much more static. Equally in *Berlin: Sinfonie der Großstadt* the trains are coming and going and we see people getting on and off, whereas in *Suite Habana* we only see one claustrophobic shot of a passing train, and Herisberto and the other workers waving, but then going back to working on the track—not going anywhere themselves. This sense of confinement has been a common preoccupation in Pérez's work, featuring as a theme in his other more figurative films such as *Madagascar* (1994) and *La vida es silbar* (1998).

Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky explores in detail the implications of setting up a dialogue with a genre that showcases a capitalist modernity, in order to present a socialist one. Ultimately, she highlights the way that *Suite Habana* reconfigures the division between work and leisure adding a utopic dimension to the film, which seems to coincide with ideas put forward in Julio García Espinosa's essay "For an Imperfect Cinema" (1969). She points out that, whilst in the classic city symphony films the inhabitants of the city tend to be "anonymous and interchangeable," in *Suite Habana*, "individuals are presented in their individuality, they have names, vocations, and personal aspirations. We learn about the city by learning about the individual lives of the individual people that inhabit it. And that [...] is the basis of Pérez's alternative vision of modernity."⁵²

This alternative vision can be understood through García Espinosa's manifesto that the "practice of art—not merely its consumption—should be a feature of every human life."⁵⁴ The evening recreational performative activities denote both an "anti-elitist conception of the function of art in society" as well as playing on Marx's own vision of communist society, whereby "nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in

any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow.”⁵⁵ *Suite Habana* therefore presents the partial realization of an ideal division of labor, whereby performance and creativity become as important for *being* as sleeping, eating, working, and associating with others, in equal measure. The inclusion of this utopian dimension, or the ongoing articulation of “dreams”, in line with Antoni Kapcia’s assessment of the imaginary of *cubanía revolucionaria*, shows that despite the fact that other elements of the film display an ambivalence towards the achievements of the Cuban Revolution, it continues to hold a more optimistic outlook regarding the role that film and art can play in society, when compared to the postmodern skepticism of *El elefante y la bicicleta*.

A final observed tendency of new realism is the attempt to overcome the postmodern mourning of the loss of the real and the notion that everything is merely a simulacrum, by returning to the “real” of material bodies and human interactions.⁵⁶ By minimizing dialogue, and thus eliminating the interpretative significance of language, Pérez seems to wish to emphasize the role of the senses and the haptic, fitting into this tendency. This approach privileges the cognitive function of reception and reminds us that we exist and experience the world, first and foremost, by means of our senses. The sharp focus, and the use of extreme close-ups, draw attention to the corporeality of the body and things it comes into contact with, for example, we can see every wrinkle of Francisquito’s grandmothers arms as she makes the morning coffee, which is then followed by an extreme close up of the coffee pot with its beads of condensation and puffs of steam. When Herisberto works at tightening bolts on the railway track we can see the heat, beads of sweat and the effort in his contorted face. Similarly the camera captures every involuntary facial gesture of Francisquito, a young boy with Down Syndrome. The scene where he relaxes in the school and glances at his classmates

as they recite numbers and solve problems in unison seems to suggest a happy recognition of a sense of comradeship and community. Medium shots are often used to frame haptic interactions such as a high angle shot of the grandfather greeting the schoolteacher at the entrance of the school and Fransiquito's father greeting Ernesto with a handshake at the door of the run-down mansion that they work together to restore. Both the close-up contact with skin and bodies and the moments of sensory interaction establish a common sense of humanity based on the materiality of the body and the physical contact with other bodies.⁵⁷

Most of the time the actors do not display overt signs of emotion and their expressions are difficult to read. This minimizes the possibility for culturally constructed interpretations of emotional signaling that, in turn, acknowledges the impossibility of knowing the inner lives of the actors. According to Tomás Elsaesser, following Gilles Deleuze, we should seek clues in "things" such as objects and landscapes.⁵⁸ Certainly throughout the film there is a trope of entrapment expressed through the various *mise-en-scène* of caged animals and the fact that we never see an open sky; it is always framed by prison-like forms such as scaffolding, industrial chimneys, columns or trees. In one sequence it is, precisely, these signs of entrapment that link two of the characters: the camera tracks up from Herisberto to a scaffolding-framed sky then pans across to incorporate a building and a tall column, followed by a track down the column to reveal Amanda selling peanuts at the foot of it. The one man who manages to leave Cuba, on the other hand, is often framed by nature. In one shot he is depicted stroking a frog framed by the leaves of trees and shrubs as if he were not in the city at all. This creates a distance between him and the other characters, particularly when compared to instances such as that described above in which characters were linked through the physical features of the city in an uninterrupted camera movement. Pérez seems to suggest a link between the character's ability to leave and his "return to nature" in a

performance of the rhetoric of naturalization. This veiled sense of entrapment would have resonated in the context of on-going debates about the rights of Cubans to travel, as well as in the aftermath of an intense crackdown on so-called dissident journalists in 2003, known as the “Black Spring” which saw seventy-five people given, on average, twenty year prison sentences. Whilst the economic problems had somewhat eased since the low-point of 1994, the mid-2000s were characterized by increasing tensions between Cuba and the United States, in the aftermath of the passing into law of the Helms-Burton Act in 1996, which extended and strengthened the U.S. embargo on Cuba.

Conclusion

This essay has charted instances of both mimesis and anti-mimesis in two Cuban films, highlighting how, through different forms of realism, they interact with ideas put forward in famous Cuban texts of cinematic theory. Both of these directors examined the power of the mimetic re-creation of reality to serve a cognitive and emotional function, producing identification and helping to convey knowledge that might not be immediately obvious in reality itself. As Aristotle’s version of the effects of ‘mimesis’ suggests, they both present scenarios whereby the function of mimesis would be to unveil otherwise hidden aspects of reality. Nevertheless, the similarities between the films’ recreations end here. *Suite Habana* attempts to “reflect” a curated version of Cuban life, whilst , *El elefante y la bicicleta* explores the possibility of directing active response through rupture. Yet by framing its attempts to modify the reality of the inhabitants of La Fe in a humorous way, and taking these attempts to unbelievable limits, *El elefante y la bicicleta* undermines any sense that there is a real possibility of film playing such a revolutionary role. It responds with pessimism to the

turmoil within the wider film industry in the context of the to the reduction of autonomy of the ICAIC implied by the banning of *Alicia en el pueblo del las maravillas* and the need to cut costs. The outlook with regards to the possibility of the Revolution to bounce back from its period of political and economic crisis is unhopeful.

Almost a decade on, Pérez engages with a new realist aesthetic, presenting an homage to individuals who are engaged in day-to-day life in Cuba. In this scenario art as positive means of expression at an individual level is illustrated by the thematization of performance and creativity as key parts of a balanced way of life. In the wider context of the production of the film it gives the actors space to perform their daily realities and thus their chance to participate in the process of the negotiation of their identities. The film does not suggest that there is one stable identity to be found and represented, but rather, that we all engage in performative acts in daily life as we react to the inaccessibility of the internal thoughts of the people around us, and adapt to our constantly evolving sense of self. Nevertheless, the film's tracing of one single complete day (with no event or rupture to suggest the possibility of change) may represent a mourning of film's own failure to intervene at a social level, also reflecting its on-going scrutiny by the state and, increasingly, subordination to the market and foreign interests. Nevertheless, the presentation of a strong sense of cooperation and community—combined with the hope of a future utopian division of labor—displays an ongoing attempt to fight ideological stagnation, and maintain the optimism that film may still be able to keep the dreams of the Revolution alive.

Notes

- 1 Juan Carlos Tabío, (Director), *El elefante y la bicicleta*, Havana, Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industrias Cinematográficas, 1994.
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), retrieved from *myilibrary*.
- 3 *El elefante y la bicicleta*.
- 4 Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 1992), 187.
- 5 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1994).
- 6 For a summary of these schools of thought on, and definitions of, “mimesis” I draw on Chris Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986).
- 7 Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr and Pamela María Smorkaloff *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 595.
- 8 Ariana Hernandez-Reguant, *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5.
- 9 Antoni Kapcia. *Cuba: Island of Dreams*. (Oxford: Berg, 2000).
- 10 Hernandez-Reguant, *Cuba in the Special Period*, 5.

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- 11 Kapcia. *Cuba: Island of Dreams*, 217
- 12 Ibid., 268,
- 13 Edna Rodríguez Mangual, “Fictual Factions: On the Emergence of a Documentary Style in Recent Cuban Films,” *Screen* 49, no. 3 (2008), 298–315.
- 14 Ibid., 299.
- 15 Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent!: Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 16 Julio García Espinosa, “For an Imperfect Cinema,” in *New Latin American cinema*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit, MI: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1997), 71–82; Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, “The Viewer’s Dialectic” (Havana: José Martí, 1988).
- 17 Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, “The Postcolonial City Symphony Film and the ‘Ruins’ of *Suite Habana*,” *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 19, nos.3–4 (2013), 423–439.
- 18 García Espinosa, “For an Imperfect Cinema,” 75.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Alea, “The Viewer’s Dialectic,” 108.
- 21 Fernandes Sujatha, *Cuba Represent! : Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006).
- 22 Alea, “The Viewer’s Dialectic,” 109.
- 23 Ibid.

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- 24 Michael Chanan, *Cuban Cinema* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2004), 448.
- 25 Catherine Davies, “Surviving (on) the Soup of Signs: Postmodernism, Politics, and Culture in Cuba,” *Latin American Perspectives*, 27, no. 4 (2000), 105.
- 26 Lúcia Nagib and Cecília Mello, *Realism and the Audiovisual Media* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), xiv.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: Movies Media and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 457–461.
- 29 Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, 198.
- 30 Nagib and Mello, *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, xix.
- 31 See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 1992).
- 32 Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis*, 12.
- 33 Alea, “The Viewer's Dialectic,” 128.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (London: Univ. of California Press, 2005), 36.
- 36 Elena Adell Tejedor, “El elefante y la bicicleta de Juan Carlos Tabío: Review,” *Chasqui: revista de literatura latinoamericana*, 30, no.1 (2001), 180.

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- 37 Rob Stone, "Killing Time in Cuba: Juan Carlos Tabío's Lista de espera," in *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market*, ed. Deborah Shaw, (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 140.
- 38 Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).
- 39 Alea, "The Viewer's Dialectic," 128.
- 40 *El elefante y la bicicleta/The Elephant and the Bicycle*.
- 41 Merlin Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), 198.
- 42 Alea, "The Viewer's Dialectic," 122.
- 43 Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, 199.
- 44 Nagib and Mello, *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, xxi.
- 45 João Moreira Salles, "The Difficulty with Documentary: A Filmmaker's View," in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, eds. Lúcia Nagib and Cecília Mello, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 234.
- 46 Thomas Elsaesser, "World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence," in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, eds. Lúcia Nagib and Cecília Mello (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 8.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid., 4.

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- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Skvirsky, “The Postcolonial City Symphony Film,” 426.
- 51 Ibid., 423–4.
- 52 Ibid., 425.
- 54 Ibid., 434.
- 55 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), 53.
- 56 Elsaesser, “World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence,” 3–19.
- 57 Ibid., 7.
- 58 Ibid., 12.